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THE EVOLUTION OF A TEACHER OF SPANISH

My first Spanish teacher was a woman who talked much of "method" and a "pure Castilian accent." Her father was an American and her mother a New Mexican, and her method was the following:

"The teacher reads the lesson (Worman) sentence by sentence, pupils repeating; she reads again, pupils this time listening to understand; she reads each sentence in English, the pupils giving the Spanish equivalent; then the pupils write the lesson in English, and from their papers, without the book, turn it back into Spanish. By this time the pupils, having passed over the lesson five times, know it perfectly" (and, it might be added, loathe it thoroughly).

After having had the *hombre* related to the *silla* seventeen times in the first two lessons and multiplied by five according to the above process, nothing but a firm family kept me in the pursuit of Spanish. For one solid year that was all that we did, except to learn, "¿Qué fecha tenemos?" with the answer, and "¿Hubo equivocos?" The second year De Tornos was added to the agony of Worman's second book. By that time, however, I was reading Caesar, and the only thing that worried me much in Spanish was the length of the written lessons. I can still repeat "Tan pronto como sale el sol, Clementina se levanta, se lava y se peina," etc., which argues for the thoroughness of the method; but I began then formulating to myself ideas as to how not to teach. My father tried to make me talk, but corrected me so conscientiously that I finally rebelled and refused to try.

Later I spent a term with another teacher who put in most of the time dictating rules, in English, from Knapp's Spanish Grammar. We never attempted to apply them, but occasionally I would recognize the fact that there was some relationship between what she was giving us and what I had learned in Latin. The only thing we read was "Nadie pase sin hablar al portero," almost every word of which we had to look up in the vocabulary at the back of the book.

When I was twenty came the opportunity to go to Porto Rico. Could I speak Spanish? Certainly, although not since my early childhood, except once, when I attended a Mexican Independence

Day celebration, had I heard a dozen consecutive sentences in Spanish. And strange to say, I *could* speak Spanish; but understanding it was quite a different matter.

The principal of the school left a few weeks after I arrived; the other teacher knew no Spanish. There were six Americans in the town, and about five thousand Porto Ricans. We had a cook who knew not a word of English, and a house boy who thought that he knew ten times as much as he did, and got us into all sorts of difficulties by interpreting according to his own notions. Evidently I must learn to understand. I went visiting with the Bible reader of the mission; translated into Spanish what I wanted to teach in Sunday school, had it corrected and learned it by heart, and when that failed to occupy all the time, taught the children Bible verses by the yard (learning them myself, of course, at the same time). After the principal left, I taught the Spanish reading classes and "Nociones de" all sorts of things, recitations being carried on in English from the Spanish texts. I kept a diary in Spanish, listened to at least four Spanish sermons a week and studied De Tornos faithfully every day; and still I could understand hardly a word. It was months before I suddenly realized that I knew what people were saying, without straining every nerve to understand; but even now I find it difficult to understand many people unless I look at them when they are speaking.

Naturally, when I began to teach Spanish, this experience influenced my way of going about it, and the children in my classes will never be able to say that they did not hear Spanish spoken when they were in school. Still, if it were necessary to make a choice, I should prefer to have a pupil able to express his thoughts correctly, even though he cannot readily understand, than to have him possess a smattering of Spanish gained by ear, with no knowledge of grammar.

After three years and a half of Porto Rico I came home, and some time later began to teach a class in a Mexican Sunday school in this city. I had never heard of phonetics, although I had used them practically in trying to teach Porto Rican children to pronounce English words; but I shortly discovered that my Mexican friends pronounced some of their words so differently from the way that I had learned them that it was necessary for me to analyze their speech sounds in order to be sure that the children were understanding me, and in doing so I found that I had never formed some of the sounds

correctly. This again was excellent preparation for teaching Spanish.

We were plunged into intermediate schools with no course of study, no programs—nothing but buildings, enthusiastic teachers, and a mob of children. It approached the classic instance of Mark Hopkins and the log. I gathered up all the old “method” books around the house and started in teaching handy phrases and the elements of pronunciation.

The first term I had six classes which averaged forty-two pupils each, a classroom containing forty-eight desks and fifty-four children, and one blessed class of only twenty.

As the term went on I worked out a series of conversations about the family, the house, directions for reaching it, furniture, food, parts of the body, and so on, embodying the use of common adjectives and adverbs and the most elementary principles of grammar. The vocabulary was much the same as that which we give now. When three of us were appointed in the spring to prepare an outline of work for the following year we found that all three had been teaching practically the same words, with the exception of verbs.

Early in the year the Superintendents came to visit us. Being a new teacher, I was visited frequently and at length, and was told on several occasions, “Don’t bother about grammar; high school is time enough for that. Just make the children talk.” Since this coincided with my own prejudices (for I did not realize what good training I had had in Latin grammar), I proceeded according to instructions. Indeed, in classes of that size, composed largely of boys who had left school as soon as they could, legally (14 years was the age limit then), but had come back to “take a whack” at this new sort of school work—in such classes it required all of my ingenuity at first to keep reasonably decent order, without attempting to get real work from individuals.

After they had learned by rote a number of set phrases and (presumably) to describe everything in the room and locate it by the use of prepositions, I began working out with the children the conversations referred to above. They were in the form of questions and answers, somewhat after the fashion of Worman (only we did not include “*establecimientos en donde los discípulos reciben instrucción,*” and so forth), and after the pupils had written them in their notebooks, the lessons were memorized. Then, when visitors came, Juan and Pedro would be invited, in Spanish, to converse “*sobre la*

familia," or some other subject, which they would arise and do with gusto. When all the Juans and Pedros who could "converse" fluently had been exhausted, the rest of the class would be distributed about the room and would take turns in asking and telling where they were, or one pupil would act as teacher and ask questions about the various articles in the room. The work was animated, the children liked it, the authorities were pleased, and the teacher was pretty well satisfied, except when it came to written tests, which her conscience obliged her to give occasionally. Then the slaughter was fearful, even among the innocents who could recite verb endings and describe everything in the room to perfection, orally.

Toward the end of the first year I read an article in a magazine for teachers of English, which described the experiences of the author in teaching English in the Philippines. It caused a decided change in my ideas, and I planned the next term's work convinced that the verb was the thing. At that time we were using no text until the fourth term, so I wrote for the third term a series of lessons on trades, occupations, and traveling, which could be changed from tense to tense with a little ingenuity. About the same time I began studying German and became acquainted with synopses of verbs, which were promptly introduced to my classes. And again they showed off beautifully. In the second term we bought and sold all sorts of things pasted on cards, as we do still, only then the conversations represented practically no original thought on the part of the pupils; but neither they nor I realized the fact. And in the third term we turned our stories into different tenses and wrote synopses on the board or bought tickets to San Francisco and described our journey quite fluently. The brighter pupils learned a good deal of grammar, most of it subconsciously, and I had private classes of slow children at noon, after school, and in my "free" periods—for by that time we had, as we still have, only five or six classes besides our classroom.

While the new work was experimental, I was fairly well satisfied with it, but it did not accomplish what I had hoped for it. I began to read and hear controversies on the direct method and kindred topics, and took a course in the psychology of thinking, and gradually it dawned upon me that I was going at the thing from the wrong end. I was giving the children good enough material and making them use it, but they were not having to think for themselves. I realized at length that while they could scarcely formulate the problems in a foreign language—at least in an economical fashion—

I could present such problems in a way that would make it necessary for them to use their minds as definitely as they would in arithmetic. I began to see that it was more my fault than theirs that they had failed in original, constructive work; that while I must endeavor to preserve the interest and enthusiasm that the other sort of work had engendered, I would have to give them just the same thorough drill that I had had in Latin if they were to acquire an independent use of the language.

In some ways I have been sorry to abandon the children of my own brain, as usable books have come out, but I know that I am teaching far better, now that all my thought goes into the manner, than when I was originating the matter. My classes are not so interesting to visitors as they used to be, and sometimes they are not so interesting to the pupils themselves, especially to those who do not like to work; but when they have had four terms of Spanish the children who do work have the foundation for a real knowledge of the language, and they know what they know.

In the ninth grade, especially in the B9, many of the pupils "slump," but I think that that is a condition about which we need not be too discouraged, for I know that in some cases it has proved to be merely a psychological "rest period," and in others the pupils have simply reached their intellectual limit.

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